

# BICYCLE!

*We humans are incurably rooted in the temporal point of view.  
The eternal's ways are utterly unlike our ways.*

—William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*<sup>1</sup>

*Much effort to wrestle the present into some serviceable political  
coherence oscillates between the poles of the all-is-new and  
nothing-has-changed dichotomy, complicating the task of  
knowing what difference a critical intervention might make.*

—Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference*<sup>2</sup>

*I want to ride my bicycle / I want to ride it where I like.*

—Queen, “Bicycle Race”<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

In William James’s world and ours, the bicycle is a toy, sport, and mode of transportation, and, in each instance, ideological. Bicycle culture, like Jamesian pluralism, shifts our attention from class relations to contradictions arguably caused by class relations. We may recall how James struggled with determinism throughout his intellectual life, yet it was only near the end of his career that he confronted *that* contradiction head-on with pluralized Hegelian monistic idealism: “[The absolute] knows me and my suffering, but it doesn’t itself suffer.”<sup>4</sup> James felt the weight of social Darwinism as it naturalized race and class relations, and pluralism was his attempt, in part, to restore spirituality, morality, and personal responsibility to a world ostensibly “red in tooth and claw.”<sup>5</sup> James’s pluralism was pragmatic, inclusive, and open-ended given that it drew “utility out of multiplicity” and permitted a “community of like- and unlike-minded selves.”<sup>6</sup> But was it fair?

Such an exorcism via pluralism is worth noting for at least two reasons. First, the individuated, experiential metaphysics in Jamesian pluralism is a kind of liberal thinking that prefigures our current politics of affect, the “feel good” radicalism that brings rights, relativism, and accountability but leaves class relations intact. Second, the *pragmatism* in pluralism forces a secular and personalized spirituality onto daily life so that risk management (everything from student loans to the Patriot Act) can mobilize debt, fear, and “shiny, happy people” for capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

Put another way, Jamesian pluralism and our politics of affect now reside in what Slavoj Žižek has called the “terrifying dimension of the pressure to choose.”<sup>8</sup> Within this dimension lies an anxious freedom that summons an impossible injunction—“Choose as you wish, but you must choose correctly!”—as well as late capitalism’s many ideological displacements, including the commodity fetish and party loyalty. The morality demanding charity and human rights, to name another, is affixed to a logic of risk that sustains the very inequities—surplus value/labor and imperialism—that make charity and rights necessary in the first place. In this sense, risk and affect blur the line between citizen and state, economy and nation. As Randy Martin explains, “Moral responsibility is equated with the ability to be a utility-maximizing actor, forever weighing cost and benefit.”<sup>9</sup> Is it any wonder, then, that “No Child Left Behind” and “Bail-out” Keynesian economics evoke a Socratic polis where security has replaced virtue, and the people don’t even know it?

One need only look to today’s Green Culture, fast becoming global in scope, to grasp the extent of this new capitalist ideology. Much like the earlier fitness movement, Green Culture compels “active” and “concerned” citizens to confront environmental destruction through enthusiastic participation in thriving consumption schemes (that is, those who can afford to participate in such schemes). Such participation, in turn, has citizens missing the ultimate cause in class relations. With fitness, one refuses the non-ideal body type that the fitness industry helps to determine (and that our cyber life and fast food industry arguably maintain). Green

Culture and the fitness movement share ideological space, and each yields commodity fetishes. This essay looks closely at one prescribed by both, the bicycle. The bicycle is emblematic of late capitalism's two strategies for obscuring class relations: affective radicalism and risk management.

### Origins

The German Baron Karl von Drais created the bicycle prototype in 1817, the wooden, walk-and-coast *draisine* or “dandy horse” (Fig. 1). Frenchmen Ernest Michaux and Pierre Lallement followed in the 1860s with the “velocipede,” including its major modification, an enlarged front wheel with pedals.<sup>10</sup> British inventor James Starley, “the father of the bicycling industry,” reworked the French “bone shaker” into a more comfortable, attractive ride called the Penny-Farthing. Sidney Aronson’s “Sociology of the Bicycle” suggests that the bicycle came to the U.S. three different times in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the first two as “duds.” The third instance in 1879 brought a “bicycle boom,” the success largely attributed to a better wheel from England and then additional changes by Colonel Albert A. Pope in Boston.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 1. The *draisine* or “Dandy Horse” (Bikefix)

The new bicycle had its enemies: horsemen and their carriages, teamsters, pedestrians, and clergymen, the latter of who felt that bicycling on Sundays dangerously drew people from the Church to the countryside.<sup>12</sup> But beyond these obstacles, the bicycle was shrouded in sanguinity as a cure for illnesses, such as “rheumatism, indigestion, alcoholism, anaemia, gout, liver trouble, and ‘nerves,’” enjoyable exercise, and a means to transcend patriarchy.<sup>13</sup> As for the latter, safety bicycles had made cycling a “general pastime” for all, and the innovative drop frame allowed women to defy tradition<sup>14</sup> (Fig 2). Already energized by a nascent suffragist movement, women took advantage of the demand for new attire: “the bolder among the sex easily adapted their dress to cycling by shortening their skirts, shockingly exposing their ankles to view.”<sup>15</sup> Bloomers on bicycles caused more than a stir in 1894, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton herself was quite enthusiastic: “Many a woman is riding to the suffrage on a bicycle.”<sup>16</sup>



**Fig. 2.** The Safety Bicycle (Stuhr)

By the mid-1890s, the bicycle translated into a hundred-million-dollar industry, with Americans spending an estimated fifty million dollars per year on bicycles and equipment.<sup>17</sup> The finished product represented modern decentralized manufacturing through a number of factories, workers, and contractors. The bicycle's assembly line standardization influenced Henry Ford's, while its overall popularity ("velocipede mania") stimulated an emergent participatory culture.<sup>18</sup>

Today in the West the bicycle remains popular, with sales reaching 18.5 million in the U.S. alone for the 2008 year. Bikes Belong Coalition reports that the salubrious cycle "may be as good or better for your health than regular exercise."<sup>19</sup> Bassett et al. found that countries with the highest level of walking, bicycling, and public transit transportation had the lowest obesity rates.<sup>20</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reminds us that active youth "have a better chance of healthy adulthood" and advises that children participate in bicycling as a form of "moderate" and "vigorous" aerobic activity; youngsters should bicycle or walk to school when appropriate.<sup>21</sup>

In the East, where some nations such as China are only now said to be entering their "Automobile Age," the bicycle marks necessity and class identity, the "clash between new and old."<sup>22</sup> One finds fair representation of this dialectical relation in Wang Xiaoshuai's 2001 *Beijing Bicycle*, a beautiful film inspired by Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thieves*). In *Beijing Bicycle* a migrant worker Guei has his bicycle stolen from him the day he is to purchase it from his employer. Guei cannot work without a bicycle. A little later, a more privileged Jian buys the bicycle from a secondhand dealer. The film depicts Guei and Jian's ensuing entanglements including a fight with a gang that ultimately, if briefly, brings the protagonists together. The viewer sees class division in post-Mao China through their juxtaposition: Jian represents China's new, upwardly mobile citizen for whom the bicycle is foremost about status and play; Guei, the migrant worker, is destitute and desperate without his sole means of transportation. This bond between commodity and subject is a far cry from the first Chinese cyclists in the 1890s who were by and large

wealthy and educated. Responding to orientalist alienation from their travels and connections abroad, these early riders took to the bicycle to display their “progressive cultural orientation in public.”<sup>23</sup>

The bicycle’s “staying power” in post-Mao China is “a reminder that most of China’s 1.3 billion people have yet to make it into the middle class.”<sup>24</sup> Much like the fictional Guei, China’s migrants participate in China’s “free market” largely as spectators. Louisa Schein has posited a migrant “commodity envy” that speaks to the workers’ growing awareness of transnational capital and their inability to reap the “benefits.” Schein asks, “How can we make sense of a rich culture of consumerism not commensurable with the exchange practices of acquiring commodities for money?”<sup>25</sup> One answer is that the 75-percent who don’t actually purchase commodities nevertheless participate in the commodities’ fetishization; the “window shopping” spectacle in China’s new shopping malls and cityscapes works circularly to accelerate China’s globalism, the demand for consumerism and increase in commodity production itself. Guei, then, is no exaggeration. The bicycle has enabled many migrants “to make the great leap from countryside to the city,” but what is otherwise a toy for a rising capitalist class is a means of survival for the majority.<sup>26</sup>

### **Toys for Tots, Bikes for Globality**

As a toy, the bicycle works retroactively to take hold of the childhood imaginary and secure adult participation in capitalist schemes. Roland Barthes illuminated the ideology in toys—“a microcosm of the adult world”—when he suggested that toys shape us early on so that we might thrive in scripted adult roles.<sup>27</sup> His thesis now appears commonsensical if somewhat dated: girls play with dolls so that they will become good mothers, relegated to the household; boys play with blocks to become captains of industry, profitable innovators, and so on. Barthes reasoned that modern toys represent late capitalism’s demand for consumers rather than producers. Where the original Lincoln Logs and Tinker Toys required active imagination and participation from their young owners, today’s mechanical toys, such as dolls that cry, nurse, and perform other bodily functions on their own, diminish a child’s

creative agency. The transformation from wood toys to plastic is therefore telling: new plastic toys mark a deliberate distancing from a “warm,” evolving nature to a “cold,” static industry; wood wears out and plastic breaks down. If one takes Barthes’s thesis seriously, couldn’t new toys, like a calamitous world war, be a strategy to solve overproduction?



Fig 3. Child and Bike (Sustrans)

The bicycle-as-toy, however, is not new, and it is precisely because cycling operates in an ideology of nostalgia and naturalness, e.g., a desire to return to nature, that the toy serves late capitalism so well. Green Culture demands that we focus on global warming—a secondary contradiction—and miss class relations—the primary contradiction. The bicycle accomplishes this masking of class by literally and figuratively pedaling riders toward ascetic distancing: *the toy bicycle prepares young citizens for anxious adult consumption of physical fitness and environmental concern*. The carefree, obedient *child* unwittingly obeys the injunction to enjoy so the physically fit, environmentally responsible *adult* will fail to see class. The onus is on the parent(s) to ensure that this risk management (i.e., the futurism that forces tomorrow’s concerns into/onto the present) takes hold in childhood (Fig. 3).

Given the range and complexity of the bicycle's ideology, it is worth better defining our terms. Žižek's recent delineation of "populist-fascist fetishism" and "permissive-cynical fetishism" is particularly helpful here.<sup>28</sup> Populist-fascist fetishism involves the "false identification of both the nature of the antagonism and the enemy," so that one blames X rather than Y. Žižek's example is characteristically provocative: Nazi anti-Semitism is really the Nazi fear of communism displaced onto the Jews. Such an account of fetishization, of course, begs the question: Is every instance of anti-Semitism in every epoch a fetishization? For our purposes here, however, "populist-fascist fetishism" could explain how individuals mistake the source of environmental destruction as the "human race," read succinctly as "individual indulgences," rather than capitalism and its (by)products, e.g., automobile industry and industrial pollution. Same with fitness: whether it's a stationary lifestyle or overeating, the enemy is typically our individual choices rather than the capitalism behind individual.

Permissive-cynical fetishism on the other hand has universality masking inequity, e.g., "Everyone has rights, so hands off my business [exploitation]!" To be sure, this fetishism extends from household microeconomics to *laissez-faire* national policy. It may be worth noting that this universality, abstracted onto daily life, is seen by many theorists as one of late (monopoly) capitalism's organizing principles. This is not the place to go into the vast amount of work done on the subject of late capitalism, but a brief definition would include post-Fordism's flexible or casual labor and the many "non-productive" labor strategies employed as a response to the over accumulation and concentration of capital since World War II, e.g., "service economy," "knowledge economy," and managerialism. Harry Braverman made the point effectively: "institutionalization of capital and the vesting of control in a specialized stratum of capitalist class corresponds chronologically to an immense growth in the scale of management operations."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in his discussion of Michel Aglietta's regulation theory, Paul Smith speaks of capitalism's ability to integrate citizenry into an "economic expansion of the means of consumption."<sup>30</sup> Such integration resonates with the abstract universality in Žižek's notion of permissive-cynical fetishism since the integration of the

citizenry works by limiting a subject's "scope."<sup>31</sup> According to Smith, "[S] subjects need to be called into place and kept there in order to achieve the transformation to a new regime of accumulation." False universality is interpellative, and the subject's absorption into global consumption scheme signals an effective dialectical relation between economic processes and everyday life, a relation which does not simply construe cultural and civic life as a superstructural byproduct of economic processes but which regards those realms as part of a structured whole wherein capital's relation to labor power is the shifting focal point of all transformations.<sup>32</sup>

For Smith, then, "everyday life" is as determining as the relations of production. Göran Therbon's work on ideology makes similar moves in its privileging of the superstructural, e.g., "If a contradiction develops between the relations and forces of production, no ideological formation can adequately and harmoniously subject-qualify the new economic subjects for the contradictory order."<sup>33</sup>

### **Pedaling Past Class**

While it is tempting to redefine the superstructural so as to give culture equal weight and causality as class, these changes, e.g., Fordism to flexible labor, do not reflect human-free ways to create value and often have us missing the fact that factory work endures; that is to say, shifting and concentrating capital is not the same thing as producing profit. Social relations indeed give rise to the means of production, e.g., technology (rather than the reverse), yet one should see "social relations" as owners and workers not "everyday life." For David Harvey, Frank Webster, and others debunking "new working class" theories, "these changes, when set against the basic rules of capitalistic accumulation, appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society."<sup>34</sup> What is significant here is that Žižek's populist-fascist fetishism and permissive-cynical fetishism do not try to rewrite cause and effect but rather illuminate the abstract universality of environmentally friendly "global" citizens on bikes as well as the demonizing of stationary, "indulgent" lifestyles.

It is perhaps not so surprising that an ideology of “responsible citizen”—green conscious and physically fit—begins in childhood, working on us by means of abstract universality. But what makes this abstraction specific to late capitalism and worth noting is that the ideology coincides perfectly with financial logic, that is, with our current finance regime. Risk management and securitization appropriate “green and fit” affective radicalism in two ways: first, through nostalgia that encourages the backward glance towards a pre-industrialized, friendlier planet and/or a younger version of one’s self (which in most cases is a better and happier body); and second, with the construction of youth itself. Much like their portfolio-wielding and debt-driven adult counterparts, children are either seen as capable of taking risks (that is, securely “at-level” or “advanced level”) or “at risk.” This strategy is nothing more than a micromanaging of futures that guarantees children will function as manageable adults. As Martin suggests, “So much for the winsome days of youth.”<sup>35</sup>

The import of risk management and affective radicalism is clear: liberalism not only obscures class relations through democracy, freedom, and rights, but through environmental concern and physical fitness. What is at work here is neopragmatic posturing that energizes our Jamesian pluralism so that “agency,” “responsibility,” and “difference” are united under abstract universality and accepted fanatically as outside class relations. One, then, sees the potential problem with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s triumphant cry, “[We want] a world in which race and gender do not determine hierarchies of power, a world in which differences express themselves freely.”<sup>36</sup> Such occluding of class is a simultaneous throwback to expressionist logic and a leap toward flexible citizenry. It is as Engels once observed about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, that these strategies are the very “pillars upon which [capitalists] raise their social edifice above the ruins of injustice, inequality, and privilege.”<sup>37</sup> Today’s radicalism, like Jamesian *totality*, offers a universe of agency and difference but not real change. You can bike on it.

## NOTES

1. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 40.
2. Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007), 20.
3. Queen, "Bicycle Race," *Jazz* (EMI, 1978).
4. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 32.
5. George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 82.
6. Jonathan McKenzie, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, Politics: William James's Tragic Sense of Life," *Theory and Event* 12, no. 1 (2009): 1.
7. R.E.M., "Shiny, Happy People," *Out of Time* (Warner Bros., 1991).
8. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Face* (London, Verso, 2009), 64.
9. Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007), 20-21.
10. Dale A. Somers, "A City on Wheels: The Bicycle Era in New Orleans," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 8, no. 3 (1967): 221.
11. Sidney H. Aronson, "The Sociology of the Bicycle," *Social Forces* 30, no. 3 (1952): 305.
12. *Ibid.*, 306.
13. *Ibid.*, 307.
14. Somers, 221.

15. Aronson, 307.
16. Ibid, 308.
17. Somers, 223.
18. Marc Bousquet, "The Siren Beyond the Self: Henry James and the Popular Arts of the MacKaye Family," *Henry James Review* 19, no.3 (1998): 219-29. Bousquet, for one, sees a kind of radicalism in participatory culture during this *fin de siècle* moment, where "the vogue for pageantry, parade, expressive dance, gymnastics, and procession" presented "numerous opportunities for contesting dominance" (221, 222). Could the new bicycle clubs, schools, and competitions have carried a similar influence on the radical, collective imaginary?
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21. "Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans," *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. 16 Oct. 2008. Web. 6 January 2010.
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23. Amir Moghaddass Esfehani, "The Bicycle's Long Way to China: The Appropriation of Cycling as a Foreign Cultural Technique (1860-1940)." 1 Jan. 2004. Web. 28 Dec. 2009.
24. Kurtenbach.
25. Louisa Schein, "Chinese Consumerism and the Politics of Envy: Cargo in the 1990s?" *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 286.
26. Kurtenbach.

27. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, Farrar, 1972), 53.
28. Žižek, 66.
29. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974), 260.
30. Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams: Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North* (London, Verso, 1997), 46.
31. Žižek, 66
32. Smith, 46-47
33. Göran Therbon, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London, Verso, 1990), 47.
34. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), vii.
35. Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 39.
36. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 101.
37. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York, Cosimo, 2008), 16.

### Images

- Fig. 1. Bikefix, Web. 6 Jan. 2010.
- Fig. 2. “Hall County’s Pioneering Women,” *Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer*, 4 Sep. 2000. Web. 7 Jan. 2010.
- Fig. 3. Sustrans. “Child and Bike,” *The Big Green Idea*, 26 Feb. 10. Web. 26 Feb. 2010.